

VOICES OF CONSTRUCTION:  
ON SUSAN HOWE'S POETRY AND POETICS  
(A CITATIONAL GHOST STORY)

My purpose here is to give a fairly comprehensive account of Susan Howe's work, particularly from the standpoint of her later writings, principally *The Midnight* (2003) but also with reference to the more recent *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007). My general thesis is that Howe's work is a project of self-formation through the appropriation of the writing (and therefore the subjectivity) of others. This self-formation is not just metaphorical but is meant to be taken literally, because for Howe the texts that she reads and cites are pneumatic—inhabited by the ghosts of their authors. I take this to be a deeply Yeatsian dimension of her work, which becomes increasingly pronounced as her work develops. In *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), for example, Howe writes: "My voice formed in my life belongs to no one else." (13)—to all appearances a straightforward statement, but "voice" and "life" turn out to be terms of considerable complexity, as we are reminded by one of Howe's statements (in her "Personal Narrative" that introduces *The Souls of the Labadie Tract*) in which she recalls her reading of George Sheldon's *A History of Deerfield Massachusetts* (1895), one of the source texts for her "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time" (1987), and the text in which she encounters (and embraces) one of her alter egos, the Puritan minister (and outcast) Hope Atherton: "I vividly remember the sense of energy and change that came over me one midwinter morning when, as the book lay open in sunshine on my work table, I discovered in Hope Atherton's wandering story the authority of a prior life for my own writing voice" (*Souls*:13). Note where "authority" is located here: "voice" and "life" are heteronomous rather than univocal or self-identical. We shall have to imagine the poet as a *fluid* or, to turn the metaphor, a *porous* subject, not the sealed-off punctual ego of modernity—Howe is not interested in self-possession but in self-alterity (if such

a term can be permitted): “for something to work,” Howe said in an interview with Jon Thompson, “I need to be another self” (7).<sup>1</sup>

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Let me try to locate Howe’s statement about life and voice, and others like it, within the conceptual frame of her poetics taken as a whole, and which I’ve taken the liberty of distilling into five propositions, each one of which seems in some way paradoxical or even antinomic when taken in relation to some of the others:

1. *The poem is a physical object, a spatial and visual artifact, in which words and letters are images to be placed like lines and colors on the white space of the printed (or perhaps handwritten) page.* As Howe said in her interview with Lynn Keller (speaking of her early career as a painter): “I moved into writing *physically* because this was concerned with gesture, the mark of the hand and the pen or pencil, the connection between eye and hand.... Though my work has changed, I’ve never really lost the sense that words, even single letters, are images. The look of the word is part of its meaning—the meaning that escapes dictionary definition, or rather doesn’t *escape* but is bound up with it” (Keller:6; see Harris:440-71). What is it to write physically—or, for that matter, to read that way?<sup>2</sup> (“How often do critics consider poetry a physical act? Do critics look at the print on the page, at the shapes of words, at the surface—the space of the paper itself? Very rarely” [*Birth-mark*:157].) Howe’s poetry forces you to look at words, letters, shapes, and white space, there being (at first glance) little else to do. I must confess to looking with a blank stare at “the shapes of words,” or the white space of the page. Here is the first poem from *Hinge Picture* (1974), Howe’s first collection of poetry:

invisible angel confined  
to a point simpler than  
a soul a lunar sphere a  
demon darkened intelle

ct mirror clear receiv  
 ing the mute vocables  
 of God that rained  
 a demon daring down in h  
 ieroglyph and stuttering

(*Frame*:33)

As we shall see, this is, in many respects, a signature poem (off-square, like one of Agnes Martin’s paintings from Howe’s painterly period—“My formats,” Martin said, “are square, but the grids are never absolutely square; they are rectangles, a bit off the square, making a sort of contradiction, a dissonance, though I didn’t set out to do it that way. When I cover the square surface with rectangles, it lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power” [Martin:55]). Howe’s poem is a fragment of a narrative shaped geometrically into the look of a lyric with linebreaks that emphasize the physicality or, as someone might now prefer, the graphicity of syllables and letters (Reed:56). “I was scared to begin writing sentences,” Howe says in the Keller interview (5), as if hesitating to say things instead of making them. In the background we glimpse the artworld of minimalism and concrete poetry that Howe writes about in “The End of Art,” where she cites the visual poet Eugene Gomringer’s poetic theory: “Restriction in the very best sense—concentration and simplification—is the very essence of poetry. In the constellation [of words] something is brought into the world. It is a reality in itself and not a poem about something or other” (2). To restrict is to confine within limits; in this case the limits are those of being (at least or no more than) a mere thing. But Howe’s poems rarely discard their “aboutness” (entirely). In her “Preface” to *Frame Structures* and elsewhere, Howe (born 1937) identifies herself as a war poet: “my early poems project aggression” (29), and accordingly this first poem in *Hinge Picture* gives us shards of the first war—the casting out of angels from heaven. Figure Lucifer as the first

antinomian. But perhaps the key word in the poem is “stuttering” in virtue of the discreet but crucial place that hesitation comes to have in Howe’s poetics, as when she writes of Emily Dickinson—“She built a new poetic form from her fractured sense of being eternally on intellectual borders, where confident masculine voices buzzed an alluring and inaccessible discourse, backward through history into aboriginal anagogy. Pulling pieces of geometry, geology, alchemy, philosophy, politics, biography, biology, mythology, and philology from alien territory, a ‘sheltered’ woman audaciously invented a new grammar grounded in humility and hesitation. HESITATE from the Latin meaning to stick. Stammer. To hold back in doubt, have difficulty speaking” (*My*:21). Except that for Howe this difficulty is not so much a speech defect as an alternative way of putting words and things together, as in the poem just now cited, or in one of Emily Dickinson’s poems, with its paratactic dashes and appendices of alternative words. “Dashes,” says Howe, “drew liberty of interruption inside the structure of each poem” (*My*:23). Howe’s dashes (or liberties) are invisible, as are punctuation marks, as in this recent poem from “118 Westerly Terrace” (Wallace Stevens’s address in Hartford), which toys with Stevens’ “care for *particulars*,” as Louis Zukofsky called it (33):

Poets have imagined you  
 whoever you are implicit  
 melody familiar metaphor  
  
 bawdy tapestries archaic  
 pillage love patience the  
 scales the dogs the boots

(*Souls*:81)

Who are you (“whoever you are”)? Interestingly, in many of poems in “118 Westerly Terrace” an anonymous speaker addresses an unidentifiable second-person singular. Maybe *you* are the perfect poem—perfect in the way geometrical objects are perfect, but

unlike geometrical objects poems are made of particulars: from “bawdy tapestries” and looted antiquities to “*the dogs the boots.*” Or maybe you’re the ideal poet, a man with a blue guitar or a comedian as the letter *c*. But perhaps the main character of “118 Westerly Terrace” is just the house Stevens lived in and, who knows, he may be there still, since in Howe’s world you can’t have a house (or a poem) without a ghost in it:

I want my own house I’m  
 you and you’re the author  
 You’re not all right you’re  
 all otherwise it appears as  
 if you don’t care who you  
 are—if you count the host

(*Souls*:78)

Pronouns are not called “shifters” for nothing. Think of this as a poem about the difficulty of inhabiting shifters (or any place at all). But to *read* the poem in this (or in any other) way is to obscure its physicality (obscure its obscurity!). So for now contrast the austerity of Howe’s lyric with the luxury of so much of Stevens’ poetry (“We drank Meursault, ate lobster Bombay with mango / Chutney”). Of course, my citation of Howe’s poem misrepresents it because on this paper there is not enough white space around its lines. We need to invoke the spirit of Ad Reinhardt and his black paintings: “A square (neutral, shapeless) canvas, 5 feet wide 5 feet high, as wide as a man’s outstretched arms (not large, not small, sizeless), trisected (no composition), one horizontal form negating, one vertical form (formless, no top, no bottom, directionless) three (more or less) dark (lightless) noncontrasting (colorless) colors, brushwork brushed out to remove brushwork, a mat flat, free hand painted surface...which does not reflect surroundings—a pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting—an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness)

ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but Art absolutely (no Anti-Art)” (cited by Susan Howe, “The End of Art”:2; cf. *The Difficulties* interview with Janet Ruth Falon:42, on what a painting of one of Howe’s poems would look like: “Blank. It would be blank. It would be a white canvas. White.”). Imagine aesthetics as a kind of negative theology in which nothing positive can be predicated of the work of art. But of course that was never Ad Reinhardt’s position. In an interview with Jeanne Siegel he said: “I’ve been called a godless mystic, which is not true” (Siegel: 25). But eliminative procedures are meant to deprive us (and not just us) of things to say:

clutching  
my Crumbl  
ejumble  
(*Frame*:51)

2. *The physicality of writing suggests that (in keeping with a number of American or, for that matter, modernist poetic traditions) poetry for Howe is an objective construction, not a subjective expression.* The intentionality of the poem is more formal than semantic—but also more aleatory and serial than architectonic: “I never start with an intention for the subject of a poem. I sit quietly at my desk and let various things—memories, fragments, bits, pieces, scraps, sounds—let them all work into something. This has to do with changing order and abolishing categories...” (*Birth-mark*:164). Abolishing categories is the work of anarchism. Of Emily Dickinson Howe says in her *Talisman* interview that “she abolishes categories” (*Birth-mark*:157), which is to say that she “disturbs the order of a world where commerce is reality and authoritative editions freeze poems into artifacts” (*Birth-mark*:19). Likewise of Dickinson’s practice of “fragmentation and variation” Howe writes: “This space is the poem’s space. Letters are sounds we see. Sounds leap to the eye. Word lists, crosses, blanks, and ruptured stanzas are points of contact and displacement. Line breaks and visual contrapuntal stresses

represent an athematic compositional intention” (*Birth-mark*:139). An “athematic compositional intention” describes Howe’s *A Bibliography of the King’s Book: Eikon Basilike*, of which Howe says that she “wanted to write something filled with gaps and words tossed, and words touching, crowding each other, letters mixing and falling away from each other, commands and dreams, verticals and circles. If it was impossible to print, that didn’t matter. Because it’s about impossibility anyway” (*Birth-mark*:175). See Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1: from *Eikon Basilike*:56-57]

Howe writes in the *Talisman* interview: “I felt when I finished [*Eikon*] that it was so unclear, so random, that I was crossing into visual art and that I had unleashed a picture of violence that I needed to explain to myself” (*Birth-mark*:165). She seems to have found one explanation in chaos theory, with its ideas of randomness, self-interruption, turbulence, and singularities—“In algebra,” she explains, “a singularity is the point where plus becomes minus. On a line, if you start at  $x$  point, there is +1, +2, etc. But at the other side of the point is -1, -2, etc. The singularity...is the point where there is sudden change into something completely else. It’s a chaotic point. It’s the point chaos enters cosmos, the instant articulation. Then there is a leap into something else” (*Birth-mark*:173; see Ma, “Articulating”:466-89). And so a page of a Howe poem is apt to look very strange, as in these off-cited lines from “Articulation of Sound Forms in Time”:

rest chondriacal lunacy

velc cello viable toil

quench conch uncannunc

drumm amonoosuck ythian

---

scow aback din

flicker skaeg ne

barge quagg peat

sieve catacomb

stint chisel sect

---

(*Singularities*:10; See Perloff, ““Collision””:525)

Read this page as an “articulation of sound forms” in space rather than in time (“sieve catacomb” has, by the way, a line drawn through it which I cannot replicate on my computer) —but time/space dimensions fold into one another in Howe’s work, which is the point of her love of “polyphonic visual complexity” (*Birth-mark*:141). Is “quench conch uncannunc / drumm amonoosuck ythian” a sonic or a visual line? (Of course it’s physical in either case.) Recall the assertion: “The look of the word is part of its meaning” (Keller interview:6): the question is, what part? In *My Emily Dickinson* Howe converts this proposition from sight to sound: “Sound was always part of perfect meaning” (*My*:55). No one has ever developed a satisfactory answer to the question of how sounds ought to be written, much less of how writing is to be sounded.<sup>3</sup> The section of Howe’s “Defenestration of Prague” entitled “Tuning the Sky” is worth consulting in this context. It appears, perhaps appropriately, to be made of noise:

oblivious window of Quiet  
closing

egeiptes aegistes aegiptes egeps Egipp  
egypt here there

Scotus (that is darkness)

forged history)slayius slamius stanius Monarch  
greengrail mist-grey who  
soundless parable possible Quiet to flame

hay

(*Europe:87*)

Closing the “window of Quiet” means letting sound in (in the form of cacophony). Perhaps we can read the third and fourth lines as a process of tuning that finally produces the familiar word (or sound of) “egypt.” Or perhaps the closing window is the dying of day that produces the guttural rhythms of frogs. The middle name of medieval theologian John Duns Scotus (born in Duns, England) produced a famous pun (dunce) which echoes the dusky color of dun. Scotus championed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, and so could be the subject of the ensuing predicate. Further tuning produces sounds (but not words) of Latin: “slayius slamius stanius.” Philip IV was king of France when Scotus lectured at Paris. Philip enraged Pope Boniface VIII by taxing church property to fund his wars. The Pope excommunicated the King, who then had the Pope put in prison, where he died. Scotus, having sided with the Pope, was sent back to England. Notice that the “gnashing pattern of alliteration” (*Europe:122*) concludes with a tuning: “greengrail mist-grey” is given the repose or rhyming closure of “hay.”

3. *In other words, poetry is also an acoustical art: words are sounds as well as images.* But sounds of what, exactly? And do we know what sounds are? Here is Emmanuel Levinas on the primacy of seeing—

Seeing means being in a self-sufficient world that is completely here.... Vision is a link to being in such a way that being once seen precisely appears as a world. This is where the primacy of vision lies in relation to the other senses. And the universality of art also rests on that primacy of vision. It produces beauty in nature, it calms and soothes it. The arts, even those based on sound, produce silence (148).

Seeing is compositional: it means distance, perspective, arrangement, and repose. Levinas seems to think of it as an essentially aesthetic activity (think of aesthetic distance). But sound, for Levinas, is antithetical or, better, anarchic with respect to vision:

Sound—and consciousness conceived as hearing—includes within itself the splitting apart of the always completed world of vision and art. Sound as a whole rings out, detonates, and is scandalous. Whereas, in the realm of vision, forms embrace and soothe their contents, sound is like the sensory world overflowing itself, forms being unable to hold their contents—the world ripping asunder—that by which *this world here* extends a dimension which cannot be converted into vision.... (148)

Sound is discord, disturbance, disruption, dissonance, disarray, disintegration, distress, disaster, but not distance. Eyes are easier to close than ears. What is the color of tinnitus? The first section of “The Defenestration of Prague” is tuned into this aggressive character of sound (against which no doubt we construct music to protect us, but Howe prefers the conflict of word-sounds)—

sound sounde)            of soun  
amend unto  
bowrougholder borrougolder borsolder bar  
soldier burrow holder Him  
bring into Awe  
stranglerstragglers no  
nightstealer  
(by ways and blind fords)  
Bog  
some little fortilage  
woden castle  
ragtaile ragtayle two letters worn off  
were a sea-poole

corner (*Europe:93*)

Howe seems to have registered Levinas's insight that sound (like other people) produces the experience of being turned inside-out and exposed to a something-or-other that cannot be grasped conceptually but instead sets a limit to our powers of cognition, coherence, composition, containment, and control. Reading Howe's poetry always involves the experience of this limit, even when her anarchic sound-forms ("bowrougholder borrougolder borsolder bar") evolve into linear patterns, as they do in the second section of "Defenestration," called "Speeches at the Barriers," whose justified left margins seem to restore the conventions of poetry—or anyhow of literary history:

Say that a ballad  
 wrapped in a ballad  
 a play of force and play  
 of forces  
 falling out sentences  
 (hollow where I can shelter)  
 falling out over  
 and gone  
 Dark ballad and dark crossing  
 old woman prowling  
 Genial telling her story  
 ideal city of immaculate beauty  
 invincible children  
 threshing felicity  
 For we are language Lost

in language (*Europe*:99)

“Speeches at the Barriers” even contains a lyrical “I,” although it is one who says “we are language / Lost in language,” which is perhaps why the poem is not made of speeches but of fragmentary allusions to the world of medieval romance, courtly love, and courtly forms of poetry—ballads, pastorals, masques—where the “Crumbling compulsion of syllables” (*Europe*:106) still sounds the keynote of the whole:

Skeletal skin

tilt

*italic lunacy*

long lines of little difference

Seventy memories

masks

singing and piping

to be

(half words)

beginning and begetting

strangers nodding to one another

stumbling and scrambling

(uncertain theme)

random form (*Europe*:113)

Imagine this as a poem about what poetry is made of, starting with antinomic sound-forms like “Skeletal skin.” What is interesting, however, is that for Howe sound is also pneumatic or even demonic because a sound made of phonemes is already a *voicing*. In her *Talisman* interview Howe says that “in spite of all my talk about the way the page

looks, and particularly in regard to these pages constructed as if they were a kind of drawing, strangely the strongest element I feel when I am writing something is acoustic. For example the pages in *Nonconformist's Memorial* and *Eikon Basilike* [with their constellations of words and intersecting, overprinted lines] are in my head as theater. I hear them in one particular way. I think that comes from my childhood and very directly from my mother [the Irish actress Mary Manning]. Even now, when she is eighty-nine years old, the theater is her greatest passion. She was always fascinated by voice, by accents, and she very early passed on to me that feeling for the beauty of the spoken voice” (Keller interview:13). But voices are not just voices. In *The Midnight* Howe recalls her early experience of Yeats’ poetry:

Maybe one reason I am so obsessed with spirits who inhabit these books is because my mother brought me up on Yeats as if he were Mother Goose. Even before I could read, “Down by the Sally Gardens” was a lullaby, and a framed broadside “He wishes for the cloths of heaven” printed at the Cuala Press hung over my bed. I hope her homesickness, leaving Dublin for Boston in 1935, then moving on to Buffalo where we lived between 1938 and 1941, then back to Cambridge, Massachusetts, was partially assuaged by the Yeats brothers. She hung Jack’s illustrations and prints on the walls of any house or apartment we moved to as if they were windows. Broadside were an escape route. Points of departure. They marked another sequestered “self” where she would go home to her thought. She clung to William’s words by speaking them aloud. So there were always three dimensions, visual, textual, auditory. Waves of sound connected us by associational syllabic magic to an original imaginary place existing somewhere across the ocean between the emphasis of sound and the emphasis of sense. I loved listening to her voice. I felt my own vocabulary as something hopelessly mixed and at the same time hardened into glass (*Midnight*:75).

Sound is transport but only because or when our relation to it is a form of obsession. To be obsessed is, etymologically, to be besieged and possibly overtaken: the prose poem of “Thorow,” concerning her experience of Lake George, New York, contains this strange fragment: “Interior assembling of forces underneath the earth’s eye. Yes, she, the Strange, excluded from formalism. I heard poems inhabited by voices”: to which Howe adds a citation from *A Thousand Plateaus*, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: ““The proper name (*nom propre*) does not designate an individual: it is on the contrary when the individual opens up to the multiplicities pervading him or her, at the outcome of the most severe operation of depersonalization, that he or she acquires her true proper name. The proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity. The proper name is the subject of a pure infinitive comprehended as such in a field of intensity”” (*Singularities*:42). So that’s how poetry begins: a subject is pervaded by multiplicities—in the *Talisman* interview Howe says, in response to a reference to Jack Spicer’s idea that the poet is in some sense “the transmitter of the poem” that arrives from elsewhere (*Birth-mark*:155): “Well, I do believe that Spicer radio-dictation thing, as I read it in Robin Blaser’s essay on Spicer—that poetry comes from East Mars. But the outside is also a space-time phenomenon. I think the outside, or East Mars, consists of other people’s struggles and their voices. Sounds and spirits (ghosts if you like) leave traces in a geography” (*Birth-mark*:156)—in New England, say, or (perhaps much the same thing) in a library. The porous subject: “You are of me & I of you, I cannot tell / Where you leave off and I begin” (*Singularities*:58). In her introduction to *The Europe of Trusts* Howe writes a much-cited line: “I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted, inarticulate” (*Europe*:14). Compare the following from the Lynn Keller interview: “No, no. I don’t hear voices (though I’m scared I might). You don’t hear voices, but yes, you’re hearing something. You’re hearing something you see. And there’s the mystery of the eye-hand connection: when it’s your work, it’s your hand writing. Your hand is receiving orders from somewhere.

Yes, it could be your brain, your superego giving orders; on the other hand, they *are* orders. I guess it must seem strange that I say poetry is free when I also say I'm getting orders. It can be very frightening" (33). Likewise, in her "Personal Narrative" that introduces *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, she writes: "I wished to speak for libraries as places of freedom and wildness. Often walking alone in the stacks, surrounded by raw material paper afterlife, my spirits were shaken by the great ingathering of titles and languages. This may suggest vampirism because while I like to think I write for the dead, I also take my life as a poet from their lips, their vocalisms, their breath" (16):

"Here we are"—You can't  
hear us without having to be  
us knowing everything  
  
we know—you know you can't

Verbal echoes so many ghost  
poets I think of you as wild  
and fugitive—"Stop awhile" (*Souls*:58)

Poetry as connatural knowledge: "You can't / hear us without having to be / us." Perhaps it would be simpler to say that there is a powerful Yeatsian dimension to Howe's poetics, which is to say that for her poetry is a form of ghost-writing; or, to give the screw another turn, poetry is a certain way of inhabiting and resonating with a world in which even mere things—leftover, discarded, or forgotten things like things in a desk drawer—are haunted, which would be a way of reading this fragment from *The Midnight*: "Wagons, rusty buckets, tires, tables shovels, broken bottles, broken glass, cash boxes, plastic cups, old clothes, torn magazines, newspapers, memos, business records. When the other half of the dialogue of mind with itself is nothing but a picture, the status of a spectral self resurfaces" (139). Whose self is this? ("You are of me & I of you, I cannot tell / Where

you leave off and I begin” [*Singularities*:58].) The poet’s self is, in Deleuze and Guattari’s language, a “multiplicity”—but at the same time one cannot help thinking of Yeats’s “Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can.”<sup>4</sup>

4. *The poem is an assemblage of found texts (in other words, citational).* Susan Howe famously describes herself as, from an early age, a “library cormorant” in need of “out-of-the-way books” (*Birth-mark*:18), but whose first experience of a library is that of forbidden territory (she was not allowed to follow her father into the stacks of Harvard’s Widener Library)—hence her association of the library and the (early American) wilderness: “Thoreau said, in an essay called ‘Walking,’ that in literature it is only the wild that attracts us. What is forbidden is wild. The stacks of Widener Library and of all the great libraries in the world are still wild to me” (*Birth-mark*:18). Forests are inhabited by spirits—and so are libraries. In her “Personal Narrative” in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, Howe recalls her experience of the Sterling Library at Yale where her husband, David von Schlegell, was a professor of art, which meant that she now had library privileges—

In Sterling’s sleeping wilderness I felt the telepathic solicitation of innumerable phantoms. The future seemed to lie in the forest of letters, theories, and forgotten actualities. I had a sense of the parallel between our always fragmentary knowledge and the continual progress toward perfect understanding that never withers away. I felt a harmony beyond the confinement of our being merely dross or tin; something chemical almost mystical that, thanks to architectural artifice, these grey and tan steel shelves in their neo-Gothic tower commemorate in semi-darkness, according to Library of Congress classification (14).

Years ago Northrop Frye wrote: “Poems can only be made out of other poems, novels out of other novels” (97): all of literary history is a recomposition of received texts. Likewise Howe and her Emily Dickinson: “Forcing, abbreviating, pushing, padding, subtracting, riddling, interrogating, re-writing, she [Dickinson] pulled text from text” (*My*:29)—an

activity that produces or reflects something more complex than the structuralist's "intertextuality." Susan Howe's philosophy of composition—very much a feature of the 1960s—is that of quotation and collage, to which she adds, however, a dimension of *intersubjectivity*, meaning that in writing she is always herself and others ("innumerable phantoms"), which is to say that she herself, as a writing subject, is formed out of her library encounters with other subjects, each of which is, moreover, historically, geographically, and (there being no better term) ideologically situated: "My writing has been haunted and inspired by a series of texts, woven in shrouds and cordages of classic American nineteenth-century works; they are the buried ones, they body them forth"—to which she adds: "Dickinson, Melville, Thoreau, and Hawthorne guided me back to what I once thought was the distant seventeenth century. Now I know that the arena in Scripture battles raged among New Englanders [chiefly the Antinomian controversy surrounding Anne Hutchinson] is part of our current American system and events, history and structure" (*Birth-mark*:45, 47). So the library is a kind of time machine—except that the present does not (just) return to the past, rather the past is always with us, perhaps as much in the form of traumatic memory (the stereotype of the New England writer) as that of the legendary eternal return. "The past is present when I write," Howe says in her interview with Tom Beckett (20), which means that when Susan Howe speaks in her own voice, it is not only she herself that is speaking, because her writing is also a kind of ingathering and appropriation—and this is true both in her poetry and in her prose writings like *My Emily Dickinson* (but the distinction between poetry and prose in Howe's writings is, like her relation to others and their texts, an open border). The principles of this form of writing are perhaps most fully articulated in "Submarginalia," the continuation of Howe's introduction to *The Birth-mark*, in which she elucidates both the natural history of the cormorant as a deep-sea feeder and the cultural history of the library-cormorant, starting with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose writings feed off of his (obsessive-compulsive) reading, which is to say they are citational in the form of

marginal embellishments (a species of open form) as well as in the form of quotation. The question naturally arises as to how one is to read what amounts to the readings of others. (“I thought one way to write about a loved author,” Howe says, “would be to follow what trails he follows through words of others: what if these penciled single double and triple scorings arrows short phrases angry outbursts crosses cryptic ciphers sudden enthusiasms mysterious erasures have come to find you too, here again, now” [*Nonconformist*:92].) This is perhaps one of the chief critical questions raised by Susan Howe’s writings: it is a question that determines the form as well as the content of her work. A preliminary answer is that what we will read has been left mostly unread—for example, Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*, a prototype of Howe’s writings since it is a montage made of “blizzards of anecdotes, anagrams, prefatory poems, dedications, epigrams, memories, lists of ministers and magistrates, puns, paradoxes, ‘antiquities,’ remarks, laments, furious opinions, recollections, exaggerations, fabrications, ‘Examples,’ wonders, spontaneous other versions” (*Birth-mark*:30). Howe cites an exasperated editor of *Magnalia*, who complains that Mather “‘was primarily a smatterer, constantly skimming through whole volumes in search of passages containing ideas which he thought he could develop in his own way or which might serve him as appropriate quotations for use in his own writing’” (*Birth-mark*:30). Cormorant. (I once tried to show that this method of citational composition has its roots in ancient rhetoric, with its concept of invention as “finding things to say” in what has already been said, or written, with a view toward its application to the discursive situation in which one finds oneself. An authoritative text is a glossed text; the concept of originality, of “creative” writing, is one of the constructions of modernity [Bruns:1-13, 44-59]).

5. *The material of poetry is historical—or, more accurately, archival and, more strictly still, anecdotal.* In fact, Howe’s relation to the past is that of an antiquarian (or “antiquary”) rather than that of a historian. This is not to gainsay the many excellent

things that have been written about Howe's historical imagination and her "anarcho-scholasticism."<sup>5</sup> In *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians, and Archeologists in Victorian England, 1838-1886*, Philippa Levine studies the professionalization of both history-writing and archeology during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—a process that entailed the scapegoating of antiquarians as a mere amateurs, that is, genteel but provincial hunter-gatherers without any conceptual framework or methodology, meaning chiefly that they did not have university degrees (35-39). Historians study documents in order to reconstruct (objectify) the past of England, Europe, the World. Antiquarians are mere connoisseurs of found objects and keepers of local records. Howe is an antiquary (down to the point of lacking a doctoral or even university degree). She is a collector of oddities, whether of books, manuscripts, religious (and poetic) practices, archaic forms or idioms of English, and particularly vanished communities, misfits, nomads, and keepers of the fringe:

*Come away—This way, this way—Calvinists, Congregationalists, Anabaptists, Ranters, Quakers, Shakers, Sandemans, Rosicrucians, Pietists, reformers, pilgrims, traveling preachers, strolling players, peddlers, pirates, captives, mystics, embroiderers, upholsterers, itinerant singers, penmen, impostors scattered throughout antiquarian New England, Pennsylvania, and New York, I cling to you with all my divided attention, itinerantly (Midnight:66)*

Voices I am following lead me to the margins. Anne Hutchinson's verbal expression is barely audible in the scanty second- or third-hand records of her two trials. Dorothy Talbye, Mrs. Hopkins, Mrs. Dyer, Thomas Shepard, Mrs. Sparhawk, Brother Crackbone's wife, Mary Rowlandson, Barbary Cutter, Cotton Mather may have been searching for grace in the wilderness of the world. They express to me a sense of unrevealedness. They walk in my imagination and I love them (*Birth-mark:4*).

In her “Preface” to *Frame Structures*, in the section or fragment entitled “The Angel in the Library,” Howe gives us something like a genealogy of her method: “Antiquarianism,” she says, “is as old as historical writing”—and in fact underwrites it:

In *Gibbon and His Roman Empire*, David P. Jordan shows the ways *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was partially built on the research of skeptics and historical Pyrrhonists outside the universities. Pyrrhonists were usually proud to be called amateurs. Often their research developed out of a need to classify their own collections of coins, statues, vases, inscriptions, emblems, etc.; and the work demanded new tactics. Gibbon calls the literary results of the labors of these dilettante researchers the “subsidiary rays” of history. The best known defender of uncertainty in history, Pierre Bayle, depended heavily on the work of antiquarians. Studies of medals and inscriptions were more reliable less subject to human corruption, he felt. Bayle’s first idea wasn’t to write an encyclopedia rather he hoped to produce a record of mistakes.... Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* follows the spirit of coordination’s lead rather than a definite plan. Trivial curiosities and nonsensical subjects are kernels to be collated like tunes for a fact while important matters are neglected (*Frame*:17-18).

This last sentence tells the tale: what falls beneath the threshold of academic attention—the low overlooked by the high—is what Howe gathers into her work. *The Midnight* contains an anecdote of her visit in 1991 to Harvard’s Houghton Library to examine Emily Dickinson’s manuscripts. Naturally her first experience upon entering is of ghosts inhabiting a panoptical space:

Passing through this first vestibule I find myself in an oval reception antechamber about 35 feet wide and 20 feet deep under what appears to be a ceiling with a dome at its apex. I think I see sunlight but closer inspection reveals electric light concealed under a slightly dropped form, also oval, illuminating the ceiling above.

This first false skylight resembles a human eye and the central oval disc its “pupil.” Maybe ghosts exist as spatiotemporal coordinates, even if they themselves do not occupy space, even if you’ve never seen one, so what? If the design of the antechamber can be read in terms of power and regimes of library control, and if ghosts “presently” “occupy” papers, you need to understand the present tense of “occupy” (120-21; see Baker, “Ghosts”).

Interestingly, Susan Howe experiences ghosts as familiars, but experiences herself as an alien presence: her clothing possibly a violation of Harvard research decorum—“and I have a new monogrammed black leather Coach briefcase my husband gave me for my birthday because we knew I was making this trip and it seemed professorial. Neither of us has a college degree so we have that feeling of failure in common and are always at war with what we wear” (121). And then there is the question of how to sound. Told that the Dickinson materials are not available, and asked to show proof that she has a right to inquire after them, Howe thinks:

I have driven up that day from Connecticut and booked into the Howard Johnson Motel, my pencils are sharpened, notepaper ready. I have waited weeks for this moment. I think of the disarming of the Antinomians in 1637, coinciding with the founding of Harvard College in Cambridge, a provincial village of mainly British immigrants. I think of Roger Williams and the “gap in the hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world.” I think about the rattle of statistical traffic. Where and when did English prosodial grammar become American? As a half-Irish or half-Anglo-Irish woman, I know an audience will always react to the materiality of the voice as a sign. Deepness of timbre is preferable to shrill. I am feeling a sense of humiliation and angry despair. I know my reaction is extreme. I can hear my voice running into its

irksome high pitch, jostling genteel decorum. The librarians are feeling its ugly assault (126).

Recall Howe's love of her mother's voice, whereas of herself and her sister Fanny she writes: "Our voices are grotesquely shrill—the way we pronounce or don't pronounce r's and u's, Amurrica, waaturrr. Our long nasal a's: Baaast-n, haarr-br, paak, caa. The horribly dropped s in Yes to form a sort of neighing eeYea. I can underline letters and use italics for emphasis, but two ears cannot be in two places at once, such marks are charades" (132). Voices are not disembodied; better to say that they are uncontrollable and uncontainable singularities, apt to break out or in upon you in their most unwanted forms. But they are incarnated in books as well as in oneself and others (past and present)—imagine bodies as well as libraries as forms or regions of wilderness where unheard-of voices resound. In *The Midnight* Howe cites Henry James's complaint against "our national use of vocal sound," which he called "slovenly—an absolutely inexpert daub of unapplied tone," as if sound were a kind of paint (132). Yet it is precisely the nonconformity or, more exactly, the antiquity of sounds that Howe articulates, as in these lines in *The Midnight* that derive from the Middle English poem, "The Owl and the Nightingale":

Stille one bare worde  
 Iseon at bare beode  
 Iseon at bare beode  
 Fleao westerness iseo  
 Opertuo go andsware (39)

Compare "Me may iseon at \_are neode / Hwan me schal harde wike beode": (roughly) "It can be seen in hard times / From whom hard work shall be demanded."

*Concluding note on the anecdote.* The historiographical equivalent of the antinomian or the misfit is the lowly anecdote, which is one of the forms Howe uses to contextualize her lyrics, as in *The Midnight*, a volume inspired by Howe's discovery one day in a gift shop of *Bed Hangings: A Treatise on Fabrics and Styles in the Curtaining of Beds, 1650-1850*. We lack a good theory of the anecdote, which is perhaps not just one thing. Anecdotes sometimes adorn official historical narratives, and also sometimes subvert them, because they inhabit the underbelly of history. In "Anecdote and History" Lionel Gossman tells the story of Procopius, who produced a history in eight books of Emperor Justinian's wars against the Persians, Vandals, and Goths, but he also composed his *Anekdotia*, a "secret history" of Justinian's court—"instances of the most brutal exercise of despotic power, as well as scurrilous tales of palace and family intrigue, that were completely at odds with the celebratory narrative of Procopius's official *History*." To which Gossman adds: "Not surprisingly, the friends of power, those concerned with maintaining public images and decorum, have generally been fearful of anecdotes and have lost no opportunity to denigrate them, while at the same time enjoying them in private and, when necessary, using them against their enemies" (151-52). This observation suggests that from the anecdote a different conception of the self emerges from the one we extract (Ricoeur-like) from Aristotelian forms of narrative—epic, history, biography and (especially) autobiography and the novel (originally a species of forged autobiography, as Hugh Kenner once said of *The Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Gentleman* [15]). The product of Aristotelian forms of narrative, let us say, is inevitably large-scale, like Odysseus, Oedipus, and the subsequent "great men" of history. The product of the anecdote is, like the anecdote itself, small-scale, one could even say "minimalist," being local, frequently personal, and merely curious:

The earliest account of bed hangings is in a legend from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. After a run of bad luck a seamstress named Thorgunna got fed up and left her home somewhere in the stormy Outer Hebrides. In England it didn't take long for

special notice of the immigrant's fantastically embroidered needlework to get around. Soon she was in danger of being promoted to the witch category. Trouble followed trouble until she warned that ownership of her hangings could mean curtains. Could be iffy. Throwing caution to the winds, she either burned or tossed her tapestries out. It's an aesthetics of erasure (*Midnight*:44-45).

Or again, a page later:

In "The Boston Upholstery Trade, 1700-1750," Brock Jobe tells us Samuel Grant owned a shop in Boston called the Crown and Cushion for fifty years. His most prolific worker was Elizabeth Kemble, a widow. Between 1766 and 1768 she produced eighty-seven set of hangings, fifty-three of cheney, eighteen of harateen, eight of printed fabrics, two of calico, and six of unspecified material for field beds. Mrs. Kemble earned one shilling four pence a day. If style is a means and not an end, does this historical anecdote illustrate genius in its manic state (46).

The history of bed-hangings, an antiquated practice, is made of anecdotes—as is the history of insomniacs, who (starting with Howe herself) appear with great regularity in *The Midnight* (ghosts, interestingly, from Howe's earlier writings): there is Frederick Law Olmstead, superintendent of the New York Department of Public Parks and one of the city-planners of Buffalo, New York, of whom Howe includes a number of anecdotes; likewise Charles Sanders Peirce, one of whose "earliest memories was of being taken to hear Emerson lecture" (49)—Emerson, who preferred architecture to embroidery (46-47). Another early memory was of playing rapid games of double dummy from ten in the evening until early sunrise with his father, the mathematician Benjamin Peirce. In dummy at whist, an imaginary player is represented by an exposed 'hand' is managed by and serves as partner to one of the players. In double dummy two 'hands' are exposed and each of the players manages two exposed 'hands' at once. Naturally Peirce became an insomniac" (49). But for the most part the anecdotes, citations, definitions, memories, and illustrations that make up *The Midnight* are genealogical, that is, rooted in the

handed-down material possessions of the Irish side of Susan Howe's family, from which her mother, Mary Manning, emerges as the principal ghost:

In May 1944 the actor and director Micheál Lámhóir published an excerpt from his unpublished memoirs called 'Some Talented Women' in Sean O'Faoláin's magazine *The Bell*. It included a description of my mother:

Rehearsals were in progress for a new play, '*Youth's the Season*' by a new authoress—a Dublin girl called Mary Manning whose brain, nimble and observant as it was, could not keep pace with a tongue so caustic that even her native city (unchanged and unchanging since Sheridan brought its greatest social activity to light in his most famous comedy and laid the blame on London) was a little in awe of her, and one all but looked for a feathered heel under her crisp and spirited skirts.... (50)

An anecdote, this, that itself produces subsequent anecdotes about Richard Brinsley Sheridan, whose grandfather produced a dictionary showing how the words that make up the English language should be pronounced, and whose play, *The Rivals*, is about Howe's obsessive theme, namely impersonation, mistaken identity—or perhaps, in the spirit of Mary Manning, the theatrical nature of the subject who inhabits or is inhabited by multiplicities (formed by a plurality of voices). There are doubles everywhere—double truths (“di-altheism” [69-70]), double-dealings (“Above the shoulders poetry and philosophy—below, the feathered heel” [72]), “double words for everything” (77). The upshot is that no single thought, much less description or account, can capture the self of Susan Howe, who describes the collage form of *The Midnight* as follows: “I am assembling materials for a recurrent return somewhere. Familiar sound textures, deliverances, vagabond quotations, preservations, wilderness shrubs, little resuscitated patterns. Historical or miraculous. Thousands of correlations have to be sliced and spliced” (85). Imagine this as an account of self-formation.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> On self and alterity in Howe's work, see Marsh:124-37; and Perloff, "Language Poetry," esp. 430: Howe "rarely speaks in her own person," preferring instead "the voices of others."

<sup>2</sup> On the spatial-visual character of Howe's poetry, see Golding:152-64 "and Dworkin:389-405. See also Lazer:65: "Howe's work represents a revisualization of notions of field-composition. As with similar writings by Olson, Williams, and Duncan, or more recent work by Tina Darragh, Howe expands the notion of field to a composition with the *page* as unit of composition, not a line or a syllable-count or a sentence." See also Fraser, who offers a number of examples of "visual poetics":174-200.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Midnight* Howe cites Thomas Sheridan's *A Complete Dictionary of the English Language, both with regard to SOUND and MEANING: One main object of which is, to establish a plain and permanent STANDARD of PRONUNCIATION*. "The Irish lexicographer's principal worry was the deplorable state to which the pronunciation of written English had sunk in his time. He yearned for the days of the reign of Queen Anne when he believed the language was spoken 'in its highest state of perfection.' Jonathan Swift's pronunciation (*Gulliver's Travels* was proofed for the press at Thomas Sheridan senior's chaotically shabby country house in Quilca, County Cavan) was for him the supreme example of elocutionary excellence" (51-52). See also Howe's interview with Janet Ruth Falon: "Having an Irish mother and an American father, I have a special feeling for the English language. Each spoke it differently and well." To which she later adds, of her experience in the Irish theater as a young girl: "I was enthralled, happy, and at the same time not really Irish. I knew there was no way I could be so clever, I knew I was a foreigner. I couldn't change my voice" (41).

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<sup>4</sup> See Yeats, “The Circus-Animals’ Desertion” (395). Compare “Ego Dominus Tuus,” where the poet summons

the mysterious one who yet  
Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream  
And look most like me, being indeed my double,  
And prove of all imaginable things  
The most unlike, being my anti-self. (212)

<sup>5</sup> See Collis; Perloff, ““Collision””:518-33; Ma,“Poetry as History Revised”:716-37; Nicholls:586-601; Naylor:43-70; and Frost:105-35. I would emphasize the antiquarian character of Howe’s historicism rather more than these writers do.